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ABSTRACT

This study examined the playfulness of toddlers, ages 18-24 months, participating in a situational context with a non-maternal adult play partner. The goal was to investigate adult interaction styles and outcomes in terms of children's playful dispositions. Play behaviors were observed and coded from videotapes. A qualitative analysis of exploration sessions for effect of parental and experimenter neutrality on the child involved simple notes and a rating of general emotional tone. Parents' perceptions of their child's playfulness were assessed using the Child Behaviors Inventory. Findings suggest that toddlers are more playful in adult-directed play than in adult-assisted play. (JPB)

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THE PLAYFULNESS OF TODDLERS IN ADULT-DIRECTED, ADULT-ASSISTED, AND EXPLORATORY PLAY CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the playfulness of toddlers ages 18 to 24 months participating in a situational context with a non-maternal adult play partner. The goal was to investigate adult interaction styles and outcomes in terms of children's playful dispositions. Playfulness was defined as a psychological construct involving the disposition of play (Rogers, Impara, Frary, Harris, Meeks, Semanic-Lauth, & Reynolds, in press). It was anticipated that results from this study would be useful in designing appropriate teaching strategies for toddlers in a context of adult-child interactions in out of home care.

Forty toddlers ages 16 to 26 months were observed interacting with a teacher in conditions of adult-directed play, adult-assisted play, and exploratory play. Play behaviors were observed and coded from videotapes. A qualitative analysis of exploration sessions for effect of parental and experimenter neutrality on the child involved simple notes and a rating of general emotional tone. Parent's perceptions of their child's playfulness were assessed using the Child Behaviors Inventory (CBI) (Rogers, et al., in press).

Although the primary focus of this study was to examine the effect of direct instruction and assisted play on toddlers' playful behaviors, the experimenter's anecdotal notes included observations of exploratory and spontaneous play in which there was no adult interaction. These observations pointed to

different levels of stress experienced by children during this portion of each experimental session. Aware that each child had been rated for playfulness by his or her parent using the CBI, the researcher questioned how a child experiencing varying levels of stress during exploratory and spontaneous play had been perceived by his or her parents. How had the same parents rate their toddlers on inventory items of intrinsic versus extrinsic sources of motivation? That is to say, had parents of observed independent and imaginative toddlers perceived them in the same way the examiner did? Likewise, had the parents of those toddlers observed as being less independent and imaginative perceived them as such?

Data were analyzed using a 2 x 2 x 2 (Condition x Order x Gender) analysis of variance with repeated measures. In the adult-directed play condition, children accomplished goals in more varied ways, invented more uses of objects, and attended longer than in the adult-assisted play condition. Those who received the adult-directed play condition first also persisted longer at goals than those who received the assisted play condition first. Although pretend play rarely occurred, the number of times children engaged in pretend play was also higher in the adult-directed play condition than in the adult-assisted play condition.

Findings suggest that toddlers are more playful in adult-directed play rather than in adult-assisted play. However, it is difficult to determine from this study if direct instruction is developmentally appropriate for very young

preschool children since the children in the late sensorimotor period are in a transitional period of development. It is possible that direct instruction was beneficial because of the age of the children in this study. Toddlers learn through repetition and imitation and need more direction. The adult should still allow play but instruct by introducing/modeling novel schemas and encouraging for imitation. Some skills may be effectively taught using externally motivating methods--different instructional approaches may be better for achieving different educational goals (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995).

This is supported by Kuczynski and Kochanska (1995) who found that maternal demands on toddlers (ages one and one half to three and one half) within a harmonious social context produced more competence. This may suggest that direct instruction may be appropriate for stimulating play with toddlers.

The results of this research corroborate the work of Howes (1992) who found that toddlers were more active participants when the play partner was an expert. This might account for the higher pretense scores in the adult-directed play condition than in the adult-assisted play condition in the present study. The adult was apparently more of an expert in the adult-directed condition because of increased control and communication. This may explain why several children appeared more distressed during the exploration periods when there was little or no communication between the adult and child.

This appears to be supported by McWilliam's (1997) research on teaching styles and student engagement which concluded that

teacher responsiveness without directiveness may not be sufficient for some children. Research (Stipek, et al., 1995) has shown that directiveness undermines motivation with older preschool children; however, the effect on toddlers is still unclear.

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Child Behaviors Inventory

Below are some statements describing some child behaviors. Please rate each item by circling a number on the continuum, with "1" being Very Uncharacteristic and "5" being Very Characteristic as they pertain to_____.

		Very Uncharacteristic				Very Characteristic
1.	Always has ideas of things to do.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Uses props in typical rather than unusual ways.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Once goal is achieved, stops playing with the object/material.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Explores different ways to accomplish the same end.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Needs reinforcement to continue activities.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Invents new games.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Asks many questions about what to do.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Seeks approval frequently.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Uses things his/her own way.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Looks to others to tell him/her what to do.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Enjoys learning new skills.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Works well on his/her own.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Enjoys doing things even when there's no purpose.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Has fun doing things without worrying how well they turn out.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Gets so involved in activity that it is hard to get him/her to quit.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Starts activities for his/her own enjoyment.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Pretends a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Uses toys/objects only in the way they were designed to be used.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Plays eagerly.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	Plays intently.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Invents variations on stories such as different endings or new characters.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Displays exuberance much of the time.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	Rearrange situations to come up with novel ones.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	Once the child has been shown how to do something, he/she creates his/her own way.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	Has a sense of humor.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	Is imaginative.	1	2	3	4	5
27.	Uses toys/objects in unusual ways.	1	2	3	4	5
28.	Finds unusual things to do with common objects.	1	2	3	4	5
29.	Identifies with many characters instead of playing the same role over again.	1	2	3	4	5
30.	Gets so involved in an activity that he/she forgets what is going on in the room.	1	2	3	4	5
31.	Is a playful child.	1	2	3	4	5

Rogers, C. S., Impara, J. C., Frary, R. B., Harris, T., Meeks, A., Semanic-Lauth, S., & Reynolds, M. R. (in press).

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